



“Welcome Refugees”

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Ps. 91:1-2,9-16*

Today’s scripture reading describes the tender relationship between God (El Shaddai) and the least, the last, and the lost, who the psalmist describes here as “refugees.”

Little historical evidence exists today that would clearly pinpoint the occasions or settings that inspired the particular songs that we now find bound in Israel’s hymnal, which we call the *Psalms*. But what we do know, though, is that the very existence of these songs indicates their historical significance and staying power.

The 150 songs found in the Old Testament book of Psalms are not like *Billboard’s Top 100*, which rise and fall from the charts in a matter of weeks. They are songs with real staying power—staying power that kept the psalms alive in the memory and repertoire of Israel for centuries upon centuries. And they are songs that literally and figuratively kept Israel alive for centuries upon centuries.

Ponder that thought for a moment: Israel’s songs/psalms were kept alive by the people, and the songs/psalms kept the people alive.

Now think about your favorite song on the radio today. How long will it be popular? How long has any song in your lifetime (or mine) been popular? I guarantee you, regardless of your answer, the length of time that any of our favorite songs remains popular will pale in comparison with the staying power of the psalms, particularly Psalm 91.

Psalm 91 is what you might call “God’s signature song.” A signature song in the modern music industry is a song that a popular artist is so well known for that any concert an artist gives is not complete without that number.

Ethel Merman’s signature song, for example, was “God Bless America.” John Denver’s was “Rocky Mountain High,” and Michael Jackson’s was “Thriller.”

Psalm 91 is God's signature song, because it expresses one of the fundamental qualities of God, and because it is a song that would have been repeated generation after generation as it gained new and renewed resonance with Israel.

II

Walter Brueggeman, UCC theologian and OT Scholar, explains in his book, *The Message of the Psalms*, that Psalm 91 was someone's personal testimony about what God had done in his or her life. It was a musical account of God caring for refugees in the midst of what was a treacherous journey.¹

Though we may think of a place of refuge as a fortress or a venue that is at least fixed in place, Brueggeman explains that in this Psalm and in the Hebrew Bible in general, God was not understood as a fixed fortress. God was not a safe place, but rather God was and is a kind of wagon train scout who guides and coaxes travelers down the road, even when they feel afraid and vulnerable.

"The images [in Psalm 91] read like the dangers of *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which one is constantly beset with threat,"² Brueggemann writes.

The metaphor of a dangerous journey may seem remote to us, but it was a common experience of the Hebrew people, who were for much of their lives travelers, exiles, and refugees. They were refugees who spent months, years, even decades, on the move, in the midst of social chaos, with no guarantee of safe passage. And yet God becomes their scout and companion, who made safe passage possible and who snatched them from danger, consoled them in hardship, and goaded them through uncharted territory.³

III

Psalm 91 depicts God's indefatigable care of and compassion for refugees. This care and concern was exhibited first in God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah when God offered to make a great nation of them.

God remained in covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants from the time that they were wondering Arameans, through their slavery in Egypt, their Exodus from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, their entry into the land of Cana and establishment of the nation of Israel, and even their exile in Babylon, and finally their return to Zion.

Whenever Israel was particularly troubled, God raised a prophet or a psalmist to stir the embers of people's hope, reminding them that God had accompanied

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* in *Augsburg Old Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) p. 156.

² *Ibid.*, 156.

³ *Ibid.*, 157.

them in the past and would be their companion in the future. And whenever they forgot who they were, and were inhospitable to strangers and aliens in their own land, God would send a prophet or a priest to remind them that once they had been strangers and aliens, that God had taken them in, and consequently that they had a unique obligation to extend God-like hospitality to wayfarers among them.

IV

Though the Hebrew people have spent much of their time on the road as refugees fleeing persecution or famine, many other people have also spent numerous years on the road—sadly, most especially in modern times.

In 2007, according to the UN High Commission on Refugees, there were more displaced people in the world than at any other time in the history of the world. Those numbers are only slightly less today. The number of refugees of concern to the UNHCR was 10.5 million at the beginning of 2009. This number includes people who live in refugee camps, asylum seekers, and stateless people (e.g., the Roma of Europe.)

An additional 4.7 million registered refugees are in 60 camps in the Middle East and are cared for by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

Other refugees of concern to UNHCR are spread around the world, with more than half in Asia and 20 percent in Africa. They live in widely varying conditions, from well-established camps and collective centers, to makeshift shelters or living in the open. Most are in rural settings, but the number of urban refugees is growing.

All refugees face three possible solutions to their plight: repatriation to their homeland, local integration in their country of refuge, or resettlement to a third country that will agree to take them in.

Refugees, by UNHCR standards, are people who, because of war, persecution, and oppression, are forced to leave their country of birth, leaving behind all they have known for an uncertain future. One out of every fifty persons worldwide is a refugee or an international migrant. Two-and-one-half times that many are internally displaced within their own countries.⁴

Refugees have experienced and fear persecution, or their homes have been destroyed by disaster in their home countries, making them unable to return. Many stay in neighboring countries languishing in refugee camps. A few begin a

⁴ [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpPages\)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?OpenDocument&count=1000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpPages)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?OpenDocument&count=1000)

new life in another country such as the United States.⁵ Over the past year, the U.S. has helped about 75,000 refugees start a new life, the most of any other country.⁶

One in fifty persons worldwide is a refugee or an international migrant. One in fifty doesn't begin to include the massive number of persons who are economic refugees, including our own friends and neighbors here in the Bay Area.

Most of us have enjoyed sufficient security such that we have never known firsthand what it is to be a political or economic refugee. But some of us may work with or have neighbors who are or who have been refugees.

Others may have a sense of having been or being what I call "spiritual refugees"—people who have been displaced from the spiritual home of their childhoods, and who have felt adrift for months or years.

However we connect with the metaphor of a refugee, whether it's literal or figurative, whether it's physical or spiritual. The good news is the same for all of us. The good news is that we worship the God of refugees.

It's interesting that Biblical translators have a tough time knowing just how to translate El Shaddai (the Hebrew term for God used in Psalm 91) into English. One literal translation of the name is "She who pitches her tent with us." Another is as one who commands the angels, as we read in today's *NRSV* translation. Another translation, which is made in the contemporary song version of Psalm 91, is of God as a mother eagle, who scoops up the vulnerable and saves them (saves us) from the clutches of disaster.

I think that it is not so important to nail down the best translation, but more important to grasp the characteristics and qualities of God that the psalmist is trying to describe. Regardless of which translation we go with, these things are sure: God broods over the plight of refugees. And God hovers over and around them, around us, and is eager to pluck us up and away from danger and harm, and to sooth and strengthen us when we fall.

V

Practically speaking, to say that God broods over refugees means that God stays awake nights worrying about and checking up on pilgrims. To say that God broods over refugees means that every person, no matter where they are born or where they are situated today, is a citizen of God's global village, and that God intends that all people—not just some people—to enjoy a more abundant life. To say that God broods over refugees means that God cares about you and me,

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c11.html>

⁶ <http://www.cal.org/co/refugee/statistics/index.html>

especially during those times when we feel lost, afraid, and far from our spiritual “home base.”

Imagine a world in which everyone brooded over refugees the way that God broods over them. Imagine such a world, and you know that it is a world where refugees are homeless no more.

Imagine a world in which everyone shares God’s view that the first and most important identity that we have is as God’s people, not as citizens of a particular tribe or nation. Imagine such a world, and you will see a world where immigration reform has become a reality, where families are reunited, where basic human needs are met, and where everyone is free to contribute to the economic well-being of their own families and the nation where they are resident.

Imagine a world in which everyone affirmed that spirituality is a journey and that the journey is our home, rather than some far-off destination that we may never reach or be welcomed into. Imagine such a world, and you will find God hovering above and around you, just as the psalmist described.

Friends, believe the good news: we worship the God of refugees, the journey is home, and God is hovering around us, even now, eager to pluck us up in Her talons, and raise us up on Her wings. Thanks be to God. Amen.